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ABSTRACT

Testimony by the education policy analyst for the National Council for La Raza (NCLR) gives an overview of demographic facts and population trends among the Hispanic community in the United States; examines critical literacy and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction needs in the Hispanic community, including both basic literacy and language instruction to meet immigrant amnesty requirements; outlines the mechanisms used for provision of ESL instruction, including the NCLR's efforts, current national program strategies, and characteristics of successful programs for adults; discusses the significant role of community-based organizations in effective literacy programs for Hispanic adults; and makes recommendations concerning the Adult Education Act. The three primary recommendations include the following: (1) allocation of increased resources to current publicly-funded employment and literacy programs to reach a significant proportion of eligible participants; (2) allocation of additional resources to the adult education program (1988 amendments to the Adult Education Act) to increase its capacity to provide ESL services as well as the number of individuals reached by these services, with full funding of the English Literacy Grants Program; and (3) maintenance of the ESL component of the Adult Education Act and resources for its services, regardless of the availability of a separate fund for ESL. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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TESTIMONY ON

THE ADULT LITERACY AND EMPLOYABILITY ACT OF 1989
H.R. 3123

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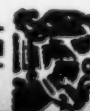
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November 2, 1989

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STATEMENT OF DENISE DE LA ROSA
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I. INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I am Denise De La Rosa, the Education Policy Analyst for the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). NCLR serves as an umbrella organization for over 100 affiliates -- Hispanic community-based organizations which provide employment, education, health, housing, immigration, and social services to about one million Hispanics annually.

The National Council supports the Committee's efforts to enhance the literacy and basic skills of all adults in the United States, and will continue to work with the Committee to further develop and strengthen the provisions of "The Adult Literacy and Employability Act of 1989." Therefore, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to express our views.

Education has been a priority of the National Council of La Raza for virtually all of its 21-year existence. Hispanics are both the youngest and least educated major population in the U.S. As a result of undereducation -- enrollment below grade level, high dropout rates, and low college participation and graduation rates -- as many as 56% of Hispanics are functionally illiterate in English.¹ Many Hispanics who are illiterate in English are unable to speak or understand English fluently.

The National Council has done research in, and published a report entitled, Literacy in the Hispanic Community. In general, present literacy services are inadequate to meet the literacy needs for many Hispanics both because the level of services available is too low and because literacy programs frequently are not designed for individuals who are both illiterate in English and unable to

speak or understand it fluently. While there are not enough existing literacy programs to meet the general need for services, programs that serve Hispanics are especially overburdened.

There are three points I especially wish to highlight here today: (1) there is a critical need for accessible and affordable literacy programs and services in the Hispanic community; (2) current public literacy efforts are inadequate to meet the literacy needs in Hispanic and other language-minority communities; mechanisms must be developed and strengthened to better meet the specific linguistic and cultural learning needs of adults and out-of-school youth who are not proficient in English; and (3) Hispanic community-based organizations represent a major under-utilized resource for addressing the literacy needs of the Hispanic population.

II. HISPANIC DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

Hispanics represent a large and growing proportion of the U.S. population, and an even-faster growing proportion of the nation's work force. As of March 1989, the U.S. mainland Hispanic population totaled 20.1 million, or 8.2% of the total U.S. population. Between 1980 and 1989, the Hispanic population increased nearly five times as fast as the rate of the non-Hispanic population. By the year 2000, Hispanics are expected to comprise 9.4% of the total population.²

Hispanics alone will constitute nearly one-third of our country's labor force growth between now and the end of the century. High rates of functional illiteracy and limited proficiency in English limit the ability of Hispanic parents to help their children learn to read and play a positive role in their children's education. High illiteracy also poses barriers to employment for Hispanics. As technology advances, requiring higher levels of literacy for

gainful employment, productive citizenship and an effective national defense, it is particularly important to improve the literacy of Hispanics -- not just to benefit Hispanics, but to advance the national interest.

The lack of full English proficiency among Hispanic and other language minority adults and out-of-school youth presents serious challenges to our nation. Illiteracy not only limits opportunities available for Hispanics to lead full and productive lives, but it also places a serious strain on our economy. A well-educated and trained work force and literate citizenry are essential for American stability and international competitiveness in the 21st century.

III. CRITICAL LITERACY AND ESL NEEDS

A. Illiteracy in the Hispanic Community

Illiteracy among the adult Hispanic population is unacceptably high. Regardless of the measure used, Hispanics consistently have higher rates of illiteracy than other populations. By the traditional measure of literacy -- the completion of less than five years of schooling -- about 11.9% of Hispanics 25 years of age could be considered illiterate, compared to 1.8% of the total non-Hispanic population in 1987.³ The 1975 Adult Performance Level Study, which developed a standard of functional literacy, found that 56% of Hispanic adults could be considered functionally illiterate in English.

Illiteracy in English is not a problem unique to immigrants. Many native-born Hispanics are illiterate in English due to ineffective education or because they dropped out of school without having obtained basic literacy skills. Illiteracy is not the only language problem for Hispanics. Many Hispanics who are illiterate in English also cannot speak or understand English fluently. Literacy and limited-English proficiency are often confused and must be

distinguished when assessing the education needs of the Hispanic community. Some Hispanics are literate in Spanish, but lack English proficiency. Other Hispanics are illiterate in English and Spanish, as is often the case of native-born American Hispanics.

Large urban centers such as Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York, as well as many rural areas, report a serious lack of resources for literacy programs. Los Angeles, for example, reports over 40,000 adults on waiting lists for adult education in English classes.

B. IRCA Language Requirements

In addition, the demand for literacy programs has increased greatly as a result of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. Individuals who wish to adjust their status from temporary resident to permanent resident under the new law have must demonstrate an understanding of the English language and U.S. history and government or complete an approved course. Given the lack of programs that develop such skills, many individuals may be denied an opportunity to become legal residents as intended by Congress unless program capacity is expanded sufficiently.⁴

IV. MECHANISMS UTILIZED FOR PROVISION OF ESL

A. Overview

NCLR continues to seek ways to increase the availability and quality of literacy programs for Hispanic Americans. NCLR believes that the only responsible way to promote full literacy and English proficiency among all Americans is by providing adequate opportunities to learn to read, write and speak English; opportunities that currently do not exist for many Hispanic adults who are limited-income, illiterate or are not proficient in English.

B. English Literacy Grants Program

NCLR helped developed the English Literacy Grants Program, now part of the Adult Education Act. With other language-minority and educational organizations, we have sought full-funding for this crucial program; our success has been limited with current year appropriations less than 20% of the authorization level. We have also urged full-funding of all Adult Education and literacy programs -- again with limited success.

Our experience limits our enthusiasm for this measure in two respects. First, we are concerned that congressional appropriations, not authorizations are the practical stumbling block to the development of an effective national literacy program for Hispanics and other language-minority communities. Expanded authorizations without increased appropriations are like a bell without a clapper.

C. Adult Education and ESL Services

Second, we are concerned that the bill's separation of English-as-a-second language (ESL) and other adult education programs could exacerbate an all too familiar problem: the failure of so-called "mainstream" education programs to effectively meet the diverse and often special needs of Hispanics and other language-minority Americans. The population of America is changing rapidly; American educational institutions must expand their programs to address the needs of linguistic and cultural minority people.

In addition, it is in the national interest to maximize ESL services. The population in need of ESL services is large and growing; at the same time the state-of-the-art in this field is well-advanced. Thus, investments in ESL programs represent a proven, cost-effective approach for reducing a significant proportion of our literacy problem.

While we support the bill's intent to maximize ESL services, we are unpersuaded that the separation of ESL from Adult Education would achieve this end; especially given the absence of a maintenance-of-effort or hold-harmless clause. Moreover, the separation may have the effect of narrowing the political constituency for ESL programs, thus reducing the level of resources available for, and the provision of, such services.

C. Characteristics of Successful Programs for Hispanics

Further, effective literacy programs for Hispanics have several common identifiable traits which take into account the special circumstances of Hispanics. The following factors should be taken into account when developing literacy programs are services for Hispanics: (1) the availability of non-threatening and accessible locations in communities where those in need of services live; (2) appropriately trained bilingual personnel in adult learning and second language acquisition; (3) culturally and linguistically appropriate curriculum which teaches reading and writing using themes and topics that are relevant to the learner; (4) accessible services which are inexpensive or free so that low-income people can participate which also provide child care so that parents can attend classes or tutoring sessions; and (5) affirmative outreach and recruitment efforts, not limited to written flyers, but which also involve information by word-of-mouth at public gatherings (e.g. religious services and community events) particularly by Spanish-language broadcast media, with information disseminated using both English and other languages.

V. COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS PLAY SIGNIFICANT ROLE

The most effective literacy programs for Hispanic adults are typically community-based. Many Hispanic community-based organizations have been serving Hispanic adults and out-of-school youth since the early 1900s. One reason for their success is that literacy activities are usually designed to meet the particular education needs of Hispanics, and they take place in a community-based setting and in the home; thus, tying literacy to the community or the outside world in addition to the classroom.

Programs such as the Family English Literacy Program represent only a minute fraction of the efforts to combat illiteracy in the United States, but because of their focus and success, represent a very significant portion of the efforts to combat illiteracy among Hispanics. Part of this program makes available funds to community-based organizations to provide literacy development which reach hard-to-serve Hispanic populations through an education project developed by NCLR.

Project EXCEL (Excellence in Community Educational Leadership), a six-model national demonstration project of NCLR, has designed a Family Reading model to increase the English literacy skills of Hispanic adults, regardless of language background, to improve their ability to help their children improve English reading skills. Family Reading provides a special opportunity to serve a large percentage of Hispanics who need special language services they often cannot find anywhere else. Currently, the project is begin demonstrated in 10 communities across the country -- including communities in California, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Texas and Wisconsin.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Recommendation: Current publically-funded employment and literacy programs require more allocated resources to reach a significant proportion of eligible participants.

Existing programs frequently underserve those who are most in need of literacy and ESL services. In addition, such programs must be targeted to reach Hispanic and other language minority communities, and refined where needed so that they can effectively serve these communities.

Recommendation: The Adult Education program should be allocated additional resources to increase its capability to provide ESL services, and to expand the number of individuals they reach. The English Literacy Grants program should receive full-funding.

The English Literacy Grants Program, in the 1988 amendments of the Adult Education Act, offers particular promise for increasing literacy among Hispanic adults and out-of-school youth who are not proficient in English. The program requires states to reserve at least 50% of their funds for programs operated by community-based organizations of demonstrated capability.

Although the program is part of the Adult Education Act, it requires a separate appropriation. The Grants program has yet to receive funding anywhere close to its authorization levels of \$26.3 million for FY '89, and \$27.6 million for FY '90 -- receiving only about \$5 million in FY '89 and FY '90.

Recommendation: The ESL component and resources for its services should be maintained in the Adult Education Act, regardless of the availability of a separate pot of money for ESL.

The Adult Education Act is the largest single source of federal education funds available for meeting the problems of adult illiteracy. The program was designed to enable all adults to acquire basic literacy skills and continue their education to at least completion of secondary school. With its emphasis on the development of literacy skills particularly among adults who are not proficient in English, it is important that the program and all its services continue to be made available to those it was designed to serve.

The National Council of La Raza appreciates the opportunity to present our views and we thank Congressman Sawyer, the Committee and the Chairman for the leadership in enhancing national literacy efforts. As always, we stand ready to assist the Committee in whatever way possible to assure that this legislation is strengthened, enacted, and effectively implemented.

ENDNOTES

1. National Council of La Raza, Literacy in the Hispanic Community, Washington, D.C., July 1988.
2. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Press Release, October 12, 1989.
3. National Council of La Raza, Literacy in the Hispanic Community, Washington, D.C., July 1988.
4. National Council of La Raza, Memo: The Missing Link: Community-Based Organizations Participation in ESL/Civics Classes, March 1989.